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# Franchised Courses in Higher Education

## Implications for the Library Manager

*Deborah Goodall*

The transfer of further education (FE) colleges from the local authority to independent corporate status in April 1993 gave them full control of all aspects of their work and management. It also firmly placed them in an environment where the emphasis is on growth and competition. One of the results is that colleges have developed and expanded their higher education (HE) provision, with varying degrees of confidence, trying to "steer a steady course in between local needs and Government directives"[1]. As far as library and information provision is concerned, a national survey just before the date of incorporation found "misgivings about inadequate libraries and study places"[2]. Within colleges libraries in the North-West region feelings were mixed about the effect of the college taking on more higher education work with the impact being variously described by librarians in the region as everything from "a shot in the arm" to "a kick up the back-side".

During June-September 1993 discussions were held with 17 college librarians[3] in Lancashire and Cumbria to explore the extent to which they are involved with franchised courses and the impact that such courses had had on the College Library. The meetings aimed to get a feel for how HE is being provided in the FE institutions, to consider how the librarian, or more likely, the resource centre manager, is involved in the whole franchising process, and to examine how library provision for HE fits in with total college provision.

Some colleges have been involved in HE provision for much longer than others, and the proportion of HE work carried out in colleges varies considerably. The new independence,

however, has given the commitment to HE a higher profile with the production of glossy HE prospectuses and a concern to develop and improve facilities such as separate study centres aimed at HE students. The new competitiveness is not only between the colleges: "the college attitude is very positive: the Principal is determined that our students will be equally, if not better, qualified than students who have completed their first year at the University".

Even so, in the region, demand still tends to be student-led and suited to local needs. At its most successful there had been "overwhelming interest" in HE provision but in other cases colleges were "struggling to continue to recruit enough students to support even a modest level of higher level study".

The rationale for franchising was that it was a way to broaden the range of courses on offer, improve the status of the college, and widen the target market. The development of HE through franchising was usually viewed as positive, with one librarian commenting: "franchised courses are regarded as the icing on the cake in the college because students and staff are so committed". However problems were noted, not least in that it was necessary to come to terms with areas such as marketing and admissions counselling, as well as library support: "HE is a positive choice for the college but as yet the administrative structure hasn't developed enough and the library certainly hasn't been involved

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enough". Several librarians commented that they were struggling to change long-held and outdated perceptions about the library and that this "attitude problem" towards library involvement in HE work was hindering progress as much as the practicalities of incorporation and the inevitable accompanying management re-structure. In another college the recent rapid growth of franchised courses was already giving cause for concern and the college library felt that "further expansion of the HE portfolio, if it is not accompanied by a parallel investment in the library service, must surely result in a loss of validation for existing courses and a decline in adequate provision for the College's foundation stone of FE study".

### **The Library and the Validation Process**

Indeed, the place of the library in the management structure is crucial in determining the degree of involvement with franchised courses. Formal mechanisms enabling the library to input into the franchising process were few, or were still being established. The overwhelming impression was that, in practice, much of the library's impact within the colleges depended on the strength of informal networks and working with individual staff as many librarians were not members of the Academic Board (or equivalent). Where a librarian was fully involved in the franchising process this had often taken time and effort to achieve: "I had to fight for the status". The extent of actual involvement varies greatly as illustrated by the following examples.

#### ***Pre-validation Stage***

- At College A the librarian is a member of the Academic Board and hears about possible new courses at the earliest possible stage and is then involved in faculty meetings to discuss resourcing implications. Although funding is not considered, the librarian can get a feel for how the subject is approached by teaching staff. The librarian makes a written contribution to the college's document and is also formally involved in the validation event.
- At College B the librarian is not a member of the Academic Board and there is no set route by which the librarian can be drawn into the franchising process. The degree of involvement depends very much on membership of course teams, which is not automatic, and informal links with teaching staff. The course teams like to decide on issues such as journal provision. Thus the

librarian tends to work with individual members of staff and to respond to specific requests. Nevertheless the librarian is invited to attend the validation event.

- At College C the librarian is not involved in any pre-validation discussions other than to provide information for the "library section" of the submission document. Nor is the librarian involved in the validation event other than being requested, "as an afterthought, or at short notice, to be around on the day to give the library tour".

#### ***Post-validation Stage***

- Following on from the pre-validation involvement in College A the librarian takes action as required by the validation panel, for example checking and updating the university's book lists by liaising closely with teaching staff who come to the library to look at current stock and journal provision – "this ensures that stock will satisfy anticipated needs".
- Only when it has been decided that a new course is going ahead in College D does the librarian, working through an HE co-ordinator, have discussions with the teaching staff (who will have already consulted their university contacts), to review and purchase stock and carry out the necessary follow-up action required by the validation panel within the time available.
- In College E book lists from the university are filtered through to the librarian from the teaching staff in the college and liaison at this stage still relies on informal networks. The amount spent on stock is as determined by the validation panel.

### ***The librarian's professional judgement was clearly ignored by teaching staff***

Virtually all those interviewed expressed a wish to be involved in or, at the very least, informed about, new franchised courses at an earlier stage. Internal links between teaching and library staff were clearly not good in some colleges. In more than one case the librarian's professional judgement was clearly ignored by teaching staff who "just don't understand why we should be



involved". In another college, teaching staff had insisted that books were bought before a course was validated. As well as feeding into library planning, earlier involvement would enable thought to be given to wider resource implications other than the obvious need for more book stock. This is particularly important when the subject has not been taught at the college at all and there is, for example, no A-level base of material to build on; or when a new subject, such as Health Studies, will cut across several areas of the curriculum; or when a fresh approach is taken to a traditional subject. Links between college and university library staff before validation were even more tenuous – only in a handful of cases had advice been sought prior to validation.

### **Dissatisfaction with the Franchising Process**

Dissatisfaction with the franchising process essentially stemmed from a combination of poorly managed validation meetings and a lack of communication/information within the college. For example, where courses are being franchised from several institutions, and particularly where franchising is instigated by individual departments, it is not always possible for the library to identify someone with overall responsibility for HE within the college. Even where the librarian was involved in the validation event there were particular criticisms:

- *that the validation event was time-consuming and not always relevant or productive:* "It's a waste of my time going as I'm not able to comment"; "the teaching staff speak on my behalf, without any informed knowledge but you've got to give a good impression"; "I receive copies of minutes so I can comment (later) but I still feel the process needs tightening up";
- *that the composition of the panel was inappropriate:* "staff on the validation panel don't have enough background knowledge of the financial situation of the colleges";
- *that the approach taken was very teaching-oriented:* "if library resourcing is to be taken seriously by the validation team then a (subject) librarian needs to be on the panel"; "another librarian would recognize the problems of underfunding whereas academic staff just look at everything in academic terms";
- *that too much seemed to depend on familiarity:* "it was obvious they wanted to

give us the course"; "they always make the same recommendations every time they come". Both comments are reminiscent of the "too cosy validations" noted on the front page of the *Times Higher Education Supplement*[4];

- *that the validation panel is not critical enough:* "it doesn't look at wider issues such as whether library staff are involved with course teams";
- *that validation recommendations/conditions are too resource based:* "they are preoccupied with improving the numbers of books and they don't tackle wider issues such as the place of information skills in the HE student experience".

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### ***Students taking higher level courses had already completed a "study skills" module***

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The value of participating in the validation event seemed to be underpinned, or undermined, by the level of liaison with teaching staff prior to the event. To generalize, high levels of liaison gave library staff the confidence that resourcing issues would be handled fairly; where there was little or no liaison staff tended to feel that they were simply responding to demands made by an external institution. One or two people clearly felt uneasy about the "PR" nature of their involvement: "you're running the best possible service you can, but there are constraints that you're aware of, but you don't want to jeopardize a course".

### **Once the Courses Have Been Validated...Induction for HE Students**

Once courses have been validated it is the exception rather than the rule that HE students in FE colleges receive any specific information skills training. Often, where HE courses are run part-time in the evenings, the students are fortunate to receive any professional guidance. At one college it was noted that the part-time degree courses, "in particular, provided little available time for information skills sessions". However, in many cases students taking higher level courses had already completed a "study skills" module as part of a lower-level course, or had been at the



college for some time, and so were “socialized into the ways of the library”.

The amount and quality of library induction for HE students reflected the approach to library information skills work in the college as a whole. Best practice occurs where there is an established system for liaison between teaching and library staff with students having access to two or three levels of support, say, an introduction to the library/library tour at the start of term, followed by more detailed work, perhaps linked to assignments, with individual tuition if required. Where staff and time allow, this approach is well-suited to the needs of HE students. However, problems with library information skills work for HE students occurred:

- *where there was no clear structure for organizing such work*, i.e. when the initiative for timetabling such sessions was with teaching staff. In one college where library sessions were “promoted” via teaching staff the take-up level was 50 per cent;
- *with part-time classes*, as tutors were reluctant to lose teaching time to library sessions;
- *with evening classes*, where appropriately trained library staff may not be available;
- *when some/all information skills work was left to teaching staff*: at one college there was no clear plan as to who was responsible for showing students the CD-ROM facilities;
- *when there was not enough guidance from teaching staff as to what was required from the library*;
- *where resources are limited or not available*: for example, students in libraries without a computerized catalogue and/or CD-ROM facilities were restricted in developing basic searching skills. Ironically, for well-resourced libraries there will always be problems in introducing a growing range of resources to increasing numbers of students.

All the above have serious implications, and several comments suggested that information skills work was clearly not effective. For example, there was thought to be an over-reliance on reading lists: “HE students still follow lists very closely and are at a loss if a particular title isn’t available”; and a reluctance or inability to exploit the library: “HE students don’t make the best use of the collections”. To take a more positive view, several respondents commented that the small size of the HE groups meant that students would recommend sources to one another and that HE inductions tended to be more in-depth because the students took a greater

interest in what was available and wanted to know more about, say, inter-library loans.

## The Impact of Franchising in Real Terms

Despite the gloomy figures quoted by the Library Association[5] stock, and funding for stock, in all the libraries visited had been perceptively improved by the introduction of higher-level courses even to the extent of franchising being described as “lucrative” for one college library. It is important to remember, though, that for many libraries this improvement is often from a very low base.

Much of the impact of dealing with franchised course provision on a day-to-day basis was in terms of stock management, for example checking and updating the reading lists provided by the universities. Although this work is straightforward enough, it was often reported to be time-consuming as the quality and currency of these book lists often left something to be desired. In particular, there was dissatisfaction where colleges had not been informed that reading lists had been, or were going to be, revised. Although the view from the university is that university book lists are not compulsory for colleges – they can devise their own – it would appear that some colleges prefer simply to mirror, rather than reflect on, the university’s provision. Aside from the financial input, especially start-up funding often received above the usual library budget, this evaluation process, with subsequent updating of stock, was seen to be one of the main advantages to the library of the college’s involvement with franchised courses: “(these) courses are often better resourced because the level of provision has been assessed and reviewed so these students tend to receive a more organized service”.

In most cases the subjects of Level 1 franchised courses, typically Combined Honours subjects offered on a part-time evening basis, were already being taught at the colleges, usually at A-level; where the subject was new to the college, it was likely that the stock would cut across and/or draw from other areas of the curriculum. Such situations provide a good base for library provision for the new franchised subjects and the multiple use of the book stock ensures that there is feedback from a range of users. A repeated positive comment was that the additional provision raises the level of stock for other students: “HE work gives a more academic slant to many of the courses and has pulled up FE provision”. Nevertheless, it was noted that “even Level 1 is hard to cater for when the library does



not have a core stock of A-level material that has been built up over the years". Where there are generally insufficient resources in the library any A-level/HE crossover is likely to generate more problems than it solves. One librarian complained that "if there is inadequate funding to buy enough materials to cope with HE courses then these students use up, for example, A-level material, and then this causes problems for other students". It is important to remember that the colleges serve a much wider range of reading needs than the universities and a number of respondents commented that "HE provision can overshadow other things" and that it was "important to remember that HE is just one area of total stock". Access to other libraries tended not to influence purchase decisions and most college libraries were trying to be "as self-sufficient as any library can be". Nevertheless, it is evident that some college libraries were confining any problems by restricting their purchases to what had been "prescribed" by the universities, whereas others were struggling to stretch themselves to take a broader approach to stock. Professional doubts were expressed about the level of provision being offered to HE students: "although the library has invested fully it simply doesn't have the depth, breadth, or volume of stock ... we can offer some sort of equivalent experience, but certainly can't offer a duplicate one ... some areas are better than others"; and "there's little room for serendipity when you have to relate every title to a particular course".

In practice, students were found to be very reading-list oriented and HE demands, where they were felt, were for multiple copies of individual titles rather than for a broader range of titles. This could limit the approach taken by the college library: "the courses are very reading-list based so little thought is given to developing more resources. Multiple provision limits the breadth and depth". Occasionally teaching departments would pay for extra copies of a set of titles for the library and a couple of libraries were still trying to build up reference collections of core textbooks. One college received a selection of back-up stock from the franchiser which, although certainly not enough to support a course, gave a useful indication of reading level and broadened the range of material available.

### Journals and Access to Journals

Journal provision raised the most problems for the college libraries, as many HE courses had required "substantial investment" in journals. In some cases the cost of providing for new courses

had prompted a college-wide assessment of titles held. There were differing views on whether this investment was worthwhile. Journals tended to be well used where teaching staff were keen and where user-education was firmly focused on journals. However, a few librarians reported that use by students was "poor" or "not as high as could be expected" and one complained that there had been "no discernible increase in the use of journals following the introduction of more HE courses", but that buying extra journals was "always raised by the validation panel – as though they think it will make us more 'academic'". Some librarians felt that they were struggling to promote the use of journals to students because "the teaching staff don't have enough HE (research) experience so they don't push the journals as much as they should".

Limited range of provision was a problem, both in the number of titles available and the back stock. It was suggested several times that this was an area where the "franchising library" could be of greater assistance, though no-one was quite sure how. The lack of back stock, however, is not something that can be resolved quickly. In some libraries back copies only covered one or two years because of the nature of the library's development, or because in the absence of qualified staff the college had not kept back copies. Ironically, libraries that did have reasonable back stocks were struggling with storage space.

Perhaps the real problem was providing access to articles. The provision of abstracts and indexes, even in hard copy, was very limited in some college libraries. Although CD-ROM coverage was fair for general-purpose titles, such as *The Guardian*, only a few college libraries could afford to purchase specialized abstracting/indexing services: "we can only just afford the journals let alone the tools to exploit them". Purchasing a CD-ROM was a big decision and clearly some of the college librarians would benefit by visiting the university's library to assess resources with subject staff.

### New Services for New Students?

The Library Association survey[5] found that the amount of study space available for students in libraries was generally unsatisfactory. However, in the colleges visited a move to HE work had often prompted changes (rarely any expansion!) in study space. Physical provision varied greatly and even where "silent" study areas had been established they were not always used as



intended. In one college it was felt that students used the library only as a "clearing point" rather than for "prolonged study". The lack of different study environments was a particular problem where HE students were enrolled on full-time courses and so needed to use the library during the day.

In some cases opening hours had been extended specifically to cater for HE students though a number of respondents commented that they would prefer to offer Saturday morning opening instead of "early late nights" which really only gave part-time evening students a chance to change their books.

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***Only two libraries  
offered increased borrowing  
facilities for HE students***

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By far the most common new service was the establishment of a short loan collection. Only two libraries offered increased borrowing facilities for HE students, although perhaps others would, and at least two colleges could not actually control the number of books students borrowed. The use of inter-library loans varied greatly. In one library they were "not financially justifiable"; in another they were "available to anyone who asks".

Not all the college libraries were computerized and this is clearly an area where the recommendations of a forward-thinking validation panel can impinge on the long-term development of the library service. One librarian reported that "computerization, and the small investment in IT, finally came about through the recommendations of the validation panel", and another noted how "carefully-worded criticism" from the university librarian added weight to his argument for such investment within the college. Where there is no computerized catalogue or OPAC, students do not get the opportunity to refine basic searching skills. A survey of students carried out by a college library with limited catalogue services highlighted the problem that "the(se) students have failed to develop the most basic search skills, which has terrible implications for those moving on to a university, where basic search skills are assumed and staff will not be prepared to perform long catalogue searches on

behalf of the student or physically take them to the appropriate books". This problem was exacerbated in libraries which had limited or no CD-ROM provision.

The college librarians clearly struggle with staffing. Limited numbers of staff mean that it is difficult to provide a professional enquiry/reference service for all the hours that the library is open; there are also problems in finding time to attend meetings, and there was little sign of any extra funding for training. Thus, it is pleasing that, for some of the colleges, the involvement with HE courses has improved the status of the library and its staff. In four cases specific posts/hours have been established (three of them for professional staff). There are still limits as to what can be done by two or three people; for example: "we attempted to focus professional interests of staff to cover the evenings when the HE students were in college but I'm afraid the level of use did not warrant a professional librarian".

### **The Role of the Franchising University's Library**

Generally the role of the university's library was seen as providing a back-up service but expectations were unclear and practice tended to set the precedent. The University of Central Lancashire provides written guidelines[6] and, although these were perceived as useful, few "partner librarians" seemed fully familiar with them. In practice personal contact was much more important, possibly because the smaller colleges are used to this more informal structure. However, for those who had not yet fully developed their personal contacts, this approach was often seen as being "a little too informal". Overall, expectations were unclear and the university library could certainly market more effectively those services it was willing to offer to the franchised colleges.

Input from the university librarian was valued, and had a positive impact within the colleges but, while not necessarily "intimidating", there was a need to establish more day-to-day working relationships: "I wouldn't like to ring up the university librarian with an enquiry – I'd like to know more about the subject staff and perhaps work together to build up collections."

Liaison needs to be consistent if it is to be truly useful: "liaison tends to be to solve particular problems rather than at an ongoing professional level". Closer links could be developed through staff training. For example, giving college libraries a good grounding in what facilities were

available at the university for their staff or students to use – possibly to the extent that they could bring groups of students to the university library to show them what they were entitled to use. Other areas of staff training could centre on co-operative training workshops or joint production of user-education materials.

Where libraries were involved in franchising deals with several universities, they received differing levels of library support; for example, membership rights varied in that they could apply only to students or to the course team, or only to the librarian, who was allowed to borrow in bulk, etc. Although such relationships may be noted in franchise documentation, there appeared to be little that was directly produced for the library. Similarly, all the franchising universities seemed to offer, formally or informally, advantageous inter-library loan facilities, but this really required access to a library catalogue if the service was to be fully exploited. One librarian complained: “We deal with several universities and a lot of their services are just ‘lip-service’ – it’s no good unless the libraries are accessible”. Partner Colleges at the University of Central Lancashire may access the University Library’s catalogue by setting up a computer link. The experience of those interviewed suggests that other universities are not so forthcoming – only one college library had been given a microfiche copy of the catalogue.

Finally, a recurring theme throughout the discussions was that the present validation process concentrated on traditional library services, whereas several respondents felt that the HE validations should look also at wider library and learning resources issues, both within the colleges and across the region: “It’s not difficult providing the traditional library services that are

required, but it’s the quality of the total student experience that’s most important”.

## Notes and References

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3. Those interviewed were all members of the University of Central Lancashire’s Partner Colleges Library Network and, except where indicated, all comments relate to courses franchised from the University of Central Lancashire.
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